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**Sounds to soothe the soul: Music and bereavement in a traditional  
South Korean death ritual**

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# **Sounds to soothe the soul: Music and bereavement in a traditional South Korean death ritual**

In South Korea today, following the death of a loved one, a small minority of people still choose to employ the services of a *mudang* (Korean ‘shaman’) to conduct a ritual known as ‘*Ogu Kut*’. In this lengthy ritual, the *mudang* summons the deceased’s spirit into the ritual space, expresses the latter’s feelings of unhappiness through song, dance, and the spoken word, and encourages the bereaved to express their own greivances within symbolic psychodrama. Once the emotional ties between the bereaved and the deceased have been loosened, prayers for protection are offered to various deities, and the *mudang* guides the spirit towards the Buddhist paradise. Finally, the deceased’s earthly possessions are cremated and the bereaved are left better able to move on in their lives.

Through analysis of ethnographic data and interviews with *mudang*, this article explores the various roles that music plays within the context of *Ogu Kut*, focusing mainly on the East coast region, where enclaves of traditional folk belief remain prevalent and where ritualists place strong emphasis on cultivating musical skills. In particular, this paper investigates how the ritualists’ music help in the expression of diverse emotions relating to loss, within both meditative and cathartic episodes.

Keywords: Korean music; shamanism; ritual; death; therapy

## **Introduction**

In South Korea, when someone dies, the bereaved follow much the same initial procedure regardless of whether they are Buddhist or Christian (these being the two

dominant religions in modern Korea): They immediately let people know of the death and the body is moved to a designated funeral place, usually situated in or next to a hospital. During the ensuing three days of mourning (*samiljang*), people come and go with gifts of money and flowers, eating together and reminiscing. Then, on the morning of the third day, the body is taken to the burial or cremation place, where a funeral is performed according to the religious persuasion of the deceased's family.

For Buddhists and others who wish to follow tradition, there then follows a further ritual period known as '*saguje*' (49 day ritual). Buddhists believe that the dead spirit is initially not aware that it is dead and so, every week, a simple ritual is held at the temple or at home. Prayers are offered to help the bereaved come to terms with the death and to calm the spirit and encourage it to depart. Finally, on the 49<sup>th</sup> day, there is a 'goodbye forever' ceremony. Traditionally, every year thereafter for about 10 years, further yearly rituals (*kije*) are held; the direct descendants come together and pray under the leadership of the first son, not only to ensure that the spirit is well but also that the spirit will support the living.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the many Christians and Buddhists in Korea, there are still a good number of people who continue to adhere to the beliefs and ritual practices of folk religion, within scattered enclaves. This 'religion' – a potentially misleading term, since there is no standardized doctrine and much diversity – fuses together elements from Buddhism, Taoism, animism, ancestor worship, and regional folk traditions, combining beliefs, symbols, gods, and procedures from all. The ritual specialists of this folk religion, often known as '*mudang*', lead their clients through rituals called '*kut*'; as intermediaries between this world and another, they serve to patch up relationships between gods, spirits, and the living. Theirs is a polytheistic world-view in which

diverse non-human entities are believed to be imminent and active in this world, impacting directly on people's lives.

Amongst the *mudang* and her followers (- for most *mudang* are indeed women), it is believed that one's soul is eternal and that, following death, a number of eventualities await (see Kim T'aegon, 1998). Many (but not all) believe in the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, often including the possibility of temporarily entering one of the Buddhist hells (*chiok*). All agree, however, that the best possible outcome is to travel to another plane of existence, sometimes conceived of simply as 'that world' or as the Buddhist paradise (*kŭngnak saegye*), becoming an ancestral deity (*chosang shin*). Similarly, all agree that a particularly pitiable outcome is to become a ghost (*kwishin*), causing disturbances to the living. If someone dies in unfortunate circumstances, prematurely and/or without having married and procreated, then excessive lingering resentment (*han*) is liable to render him/her unable to leave things behind. In such circumstances, relatives sometimes hire the *mudang*'s services to help grant peace. In the *mudang*'s post-death ritual, all the protagonists (including the deceased) are encouraged to expurgate their sorrows and then the *mudang* 'guides' the unhappy spirit to a peaceful place, thereby helping achieve some degree of 'closure' for all. There are many different versions and styles of post-death ritual, varying according to region, context of death, and specialisms of the ritualist.<sup>2</sup> In most cases, music and dance feature in the proceedings.

This article investigates the roles that musical performance plays during the *mudang*'s post-death ritual, particularly seeking to establish how music helps the bereaved to come to terms with loss. It focuses on a highly elaborate style of ritual that is still sometimes commissioned by bereaved believers in villages along Korea's East Coast: Ogu Kut.<sup>3</sup> This ritual, which often lasts for over 20 hours, is performed by large

troupes of hereditary *mudang* (*sesŭmmu*) – between 10 and 20 men and women who are interrelated by blood, marriage, or adoption.<sup>4</sup> Unlike charismatic *mudang* (*kangshinmu*), these ritualists do not accept spirits into their own bodies, give oracles, or perform supernatural feats. Instead, they emphasise the use of artistic skills – song, dance, and instrumental performance – together with elaborate propitiatory ritual procedures to achieve their objectives.<sup>5</sup>

In the East Coast region, the hereditary *mudang* troupe usually perform Ogu Kut in a tent, temporarily erected a short distance away from the main village where the deceased once lived, often down by the seaside. The interior of the tent is lavishly decorated with brightly coloured, richly symbolic paraphernalia and Buddhist sutras written on paper streamers and, at the far end, there is an altar stacked with fruit, other offerings and an impressive display of paper flowers.<sup>6</sup> Wearing similarly vibrant colours and sparkling jewellery, the female ritualists take it in turns to officiate before the altar, skilfully executing songs, prayers and dances, and leading the ritual activities. Meanwhile, the men sit on the floor in the centre of the ritual space: the leader provides the core of the accompaniment on a double-headed hourglass drum (*changgo*), another man marks out the most important beats on a large gong (*ching*), and two to six others intermittently play small hand-held gongs (*kkwaenggwari*). Music is performed throughout most of the ritual, featuring a wide variety of musical structures. The style itself is thoroughly distinct from all others and is “as loud as the coloured paper flowers” (to quote a friend’s observation) – marking out the ritual space as a truly special place, separate from ordinary life.

## Coming together

Before the ritual proper gets under way, a small party heads out to collect the deceased's wandering spirit, setting up a small altar beside a road, in the harbour, or even on a boat at sea (if they drowned). With various mementos of the spirit's life placed on the altar – a shred of clothing, lock of hair, photograph – a male ritualist calls out his or her name, chants Buddhist prayers, and loudly beats out pulses on a hand gong. In this way, he summons the spirit into a pre-prepared spirit-vessel – often a small brass bowl with rice inside – which is then taken back to the ritual tent.

Thereafter, a succession of powerful gods is summoned to participate. Here, music performs a rather different role from that encountered in charismatic *mudang* ritual. In the latter context, simple rhythms or pulses on crashing gongs and drum work in conjunction with the *mudang*'s own vigorous body movements (jumping up and down, spinning in circles) to inhibit some of her cognitive functions, promoting the state of disassociation often referred to as 'trance'; in this state, the *mudang* is able to accept the spirit into herself, evincing a perceivable transformation that is followed by oracles and sometimes supernatural feats.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the hereditary *mudang* invite spirits not into themselves but into a spirit vessel or simply the environment; here, there is no moment of apparition and it is largely the musicians' responsibility to make the participants 'feel' (the ritualists' own choice of word) that the divine presence has indeed arrived.<sup>8</sup>

The first god to be invited is Kolmaegi – a particularly powerful deity who guards the community and enables the transition of spirits between this world and the other. A tall bamboo pole is leaned against the tent's exterior to serve as a spirit vessel. Inside, the ensemble begins to play a structure called '*ch'ŏngbo changdan*' ('prayer music'),

using a text describing Kolmaegi's power and asking for protection and assistance. Initially, the music is based on a long rhythmic cycle, having ten beats (each with a 3+3+2 internal structure) between each strike of the large gong; while the drummer plays elaborate variations, there is an alternation between the officiating *mudang*'s song, executed at the lower end of her vocal range, and an extremely loud wash-of-sound effect produced by the hand gong players. Here, the hand gong players eschew the constraints of having to fit neatly together and conform to prescribed hierarchical roles, disregarding the boundaries of metre (marked by the drum and large gong) and vigorously pursuing their own independent metric paths.<sup>9</sup> The composite patterning is so complex, dense, and unpredictable that it allows few obvious sonic points for the mind to latch on to; the participants 'cannot hear themselves think' but they cannot connect with the music either, so they sit in bamboozled silence. The practice of combining contrasting, cognitively-challenging metrical patterning to prepare the way for religious experience is well documented in ethnomusicological scholarship (see, for example, Hodgkinson, 2000; Avorgbedor, 1987; Friedson, 1996; Koen, 2005). Avorgbedor's observations about West African Yeve Cult music apply equally well to the case of East Coast Ogu Kut:<sup>10</sup>

The opposition of free and strict time structures heightens the dramatic moment and places the audience (dancers too) in a situation where temporal orientation is blurred and disembodied temporarily. The role of this ambiguity in the affective determination of an elevated or spiritual experience cannot... be overstressed.

(1987, pp. 14–15)

The music then progresses seamlessly through a series of rhythmic cycles, each shorter and more immediately comprehensible than the last, while the *mudang*'s singing



gradually moves into the higher realms of her vocal range. Roughly 30 minutes later, the cycle has shortened into a driving rhythm, the hand-gongs have dropped out altogether, and the *mudang* is singing at the top of her voice while dancing to the beat. With their attentions now turned outwards and locked onto the driving rhythm and movements, the participants enter a light trance state.<sup>11</sup> To express and fuel the feeling of shared focus and purpose, they call out encouragements (“Good drumming”), clap along, sway in time, or even dance; in spite of sorrow, the tent’s interior is soon a-glow with collective effervescence. At the emotional peak, the music stops quite suddenly and, in the ‘afterglow’, the *mudang* brings in the bamboo pole from outside – perhaps with Kolmaegi within? The *mudang* brushes the pole’s branches over the bereaved and over the spirit vessel in which the deceased resides, bestowing blessings.

Although the ritualists use a variety of different musical structures to summon deities, it is not the case that specific gods have their own particular ‘rhythmic modes’, used to attract and actualize them in the ritual space – as in certain well-documented African religious traditions, for example (see Friedson, 1996; Adegbite, 1988, p. 23). It should also be pointed out, perhaps, that the musical patterns do not convey any encrypted messages to the spirit world – as in other well-documented religious traditions elsewhere (see, for example, Falk, 2004; Li, 1993). Rather, the East Coast ritualists have explained to me that their musical patterns are specifically designed to affect the participants’ experience, with less consideration given to the gods’ unknown and unknowable experience.

All of the musical structures used to summon deities feature the type of progression described above – from relatively slow and diffuse (with many contrasting things happening at once) to fast and concentrated (with parts closely co-ordinated in an immediately intelligible fashion). This is a progression that can also be identified in

many other religious musical traditions around the world, employed to generate excitement and help participants join together in a communal experience of divine presence; so, for example, Izjerman observes that contact between human and non-human in Zambian possession ritual can only happen when music has “heated up” the ritual space (1995, p. 264; for other examples, see Berliner, 1975/6, p. 133; Koen, 2005). The senior ritual musicians in the East Coast ritual tradition similarly acknowledge that music is indispensable for bringing all the parties together – and stress that this pooling of resources is, in turn, an indispensable first step for ensuring therapeutic efficacy for the bereaved.

## **Purification**

Not all spirits are welcome, however, and performances of summoning music are generally juxtaposed with dispelling music. It is particularly important to dispel the mischievous ghosts (*chapkwi*) that are thought to assemble wherever the living gather; given the fragile conditions of the bereaved and the deceased, their presence is considered to be potentially disruptive.

The most comprehensive clean-up of the ritual space occurs at the very start of Ogu Kut, where music features prominently alongside other purifiers such as fire, water, and Buddhist chant (*yömbul*). Here, the ensemble performs an instrumental structure called ‘*tŭrŏnggaengi*’, which one of the ritual musicians described to me as functioning like a household cleaning product (Mills 2010: 149). Like the above-mentioned *ch’ŏngbo changdan* and many other musical structures in the ritualists’ repertoire, *tŭrŏnggaengi* is made up of a sequence of rhythmic cycles which get shorter and shorter and it is the last of these cycles which constitutes the most active ingredient. This final

cycle is known by the ritualists as '*sajap'uri*', a name that explicitly indicates its exorcistic function, '*saja*' denoting a particularly scary class of ghost, which comes to take the souls of the living, and '*p'uri*' denoting expulsion. Played fast and loud, *sajap'uri* features a high density of strongly accented strokes, especially for the player of the big gong. The musicians hit their instruments hard, creating visual gestures and abrasive percussive sounds that are considered effective in frightening away the unwanted spirits (ibid, p. 163).

At other times, the musicians clean-up the ritual space by playing *sajap'uri* on its own (without preceding musical sections), often in conjunction with the officiating *mudang* throwing alcohol onto the ground outside the ritual space to draw away the ghosts. The ritualists sometimes refer to these brief bursts of dispelling music as '*subuch'igi*', meaning "beating the ghosts" – a name that vividly encapsulates the processes by which the music is thought to achieve its exorcistic action.

### **Cathartic weeping**

The term '*p'uri*' is applied not only to the expulsion of negative forces that are external but also the expulsion of psychological problems. Given the term's wide applicability, not surprisingly, *mudang* often isolate '*p'uri*' as being the overriding objective of all their work. In Ogu Kut, the *mudang* approach the resolution and banishment of grief (and its causes and effects) in a typically 'hands-on' manner. They present the bereaved with the bleak finality of death in an uncompromising fashion. Then, in accordance with the pooling principle mentioned earlier, they encourage the bereaved to share their feelings about this irreversible loss and, together, everyone indulges in a cathartic unleashing of emotion.<sup>12</sup>

Grief-expelling procedures are particularly concentrated in a ritual section called ‘Chomangja Kut’ (literally, ‘Inviting the dead person ritual’), in which the deceased’s spirit is invited to express itself before leaving forever. The importance of this section is highlighted musically by the initial summoning text being set to *tchoshigye*, a structure not played in any other context and widely acknowledged by ritualists to be the most complex item in the repertoire. To ensure purification, the *mudang* then dances to the aforementioned *tŭrŏnggaengi*. After this, everybody is ready to receive the deceased’s final messages.

The *mudang* expresses the final messages using a distinctive style of singing called ‘weeping song’ (‘*shisŏl*’ or ‘*urŭm sori*’). Most of the content is delivered using just three different pitches (la–sol–mi), with melodic phrases invariably tracing a falling curve. Clauses tend to begin with an alternation between the top two pitches (la–sol), often with a rapid falling movement from upper to lower (suggesting emotional agitation) or a sliding back and forth between them (suggesting indecision or instability). At the ends of clauses, the contour descends to the bottom pitch (mi), which is usually disrupted by unsteady air-flow, sniffs, and gasps.<sup>13</sup> The drummer echoes and reinforces the expression of his partner. His mainly-textless vocalizations often stray up into falsetto, where he whimpers back and forth between neighbouring pitches. Sometimes he switches to his normal voice to remark “Yes, that’s right!” and occasionally punctuates the long stream of material with a short drum pattern.

The *mudang* switches between the first and third person view. In the first-person, she tells of the deceased’s sadness at passing and his/her desire to live longer, and recollects the high and low points of life, offering thanks for good treatment received (often naming individuals) and apologising for poor behaviour.<sup>14</sup> In the third-person passages, the *mudang* presents biographical information and philosophical

observations about the nature of life and death. Throughout, she skilfully weaves together tried-and-tested stock phrases with more detailed pieces of personal information (gathered during pre-ritual consultation with the bereaved). The following passage of ‘weeping song’ text is taken from an *Ogu Kut* performed by hereditary ritualists for one of their own relatives, a senior ritualist called Kim Sŏkch’ul who died in 2006. Here, the *mudang*’s delivery switches from philosophical observation (line 1) to biography (line 2), to first-person autobiography (line 6), and back to philosophy (for the last 5 lines):

People are born and some live well and others don’t. All is pre-destined but:

How could dead Mr. Kim lose his parents so very young?

And then, having been raised by his older brother,

How could he spend so very long in a luckless union with a woman?

But then he met this granny here.

My lady met me long ago,

But she lived in hardship and hunger because of me.

People say that I was gifted with endless skills and popularity –

Earning lots of money, gambling away lots of money, and enjoying women.

But, because of me, she had to come looking for me, day after day,

Bringing me little bags of money.

Still, she stayed with me until the end – even learning the arts from me.

So is it fair that she’s like she is now?<sup>15</sup>

Long, long, a thousand *li* [a unit of distance], coming and going with an empty cart.

Born an empty vessel, dying an empty vessel, empty handed: this human life.

Leaving behind all that you did and all your precious things.

Dying an empty vessel, empty handed: this human life.

It is sad and sorrowful.<sup>16</sup>

The *mudang* weeps copiously as she sings of ‘her’ plight, with tears pouring down her face; the predicament is bleak with no suggestion of continued links beyond the grave and no sweetening consolations (such as “he will live on in our hearts”). Inevitably, the bereaved soon join the *mudang* (the deceased) and the drummer in the outpouring of grief. In many respects the *mudang*’s weeping song closely resembles other forms of ritual lamentation, which similarly feature falling melodic contours that are “paradigmatic of a sigh” and emotional “icons of crying” such as falsetto and audible inhalation, as a way of “showing rather than describing emotional affect” (Tolbert, 1990, pp. 88, 90; see also Caraveli-Chaves, 1980; Feld, 1982; Urban, 1988; McLaren & Chen Qinjian, 2000). These other traditions also appear to involve much the same performative process wherein the lamenter bridges realms of existence – life and death, physical and metaphysical, present and past – “to effect a communal confrontation with death and, through it, a catharsis” (Caraveli-Chaves, 1980, p. 144; *ibid*; see also Wolf, 2000, p. 167). As Wolf points out, drawing on the work of William Reddy, in all of these ritual contexts, music essentially serves as an emotive – a sign of an emotional state and, at the same time, an instigator of the same state (2001, p. 382).

### **From sorrow into joy**

Throughout Ogu Kut, the ritualists use various other forms of emotive (in addition to ‘weeping song’) to represent specific psychological states and also bring them about. Not surprisingly, in many cases the focal emotion is not sorrow but joy and, in their psychodramatic performance, the *mudang* employ a wide variety of symbolic props in

combination with dance and music to represent and hopefully evince a transformation from sorrow to joy. A commonly performed and often-cited example of this practice is *kop'uri* (knot release ritual), in which a *mudang* ties knots (representing problems) in a long white cloth and then joyfully unties them (Kister, 1997, p. 78; Park, 2003, p. 365; Mills, 2010, p. 165).

Kim Junghee, a senior ritualist in the tradition, explained to me that the ensemble's many exuberant, improvisatory and virtuosic passages similarly aim to demonstrate positive psychological transformation; in particular, they exemplify a playful approach to material that results in breaking free of personal confines (Mills, 2010, p. 165). In many passages, the hand gong players perform "according to their hearts' desires", playfully improvising sequences of patterns that have their own metric logic and refusing to fit neatly within the metric framework of the rhythmic cycle, as demarcated by the large gong (discussed earlier). Meanwhile, the drummer divides up the rhythmic cycle in a myriad of ways, again and again defying expectation to build up tension before segueing to more expected patterning to achieve momentary release; this creates what Kim describes as an endless stream of "tying up, loosening, tying up, loosening..." in which the ties are particularly tight and every loosening action is a source of relief. In some ways then, the performance may be regarded as the musical equivalent of the aforementioned knot ritual.

Significantly, the biggest divergences from regular metric models occur during the aforementioned Ch'omangja Kut, interspersed between passages of 'weeping song'. As was indicated earlier, this section constitutes a crisis point in proceedings; the situation faced by bereaved and the deceased seems to be at its most unresolvable, with the dead spirit being unable to stay but unwilling to leave and the bereaved being unwilling to say goodbye forever. Of course, there is only one possible outcome but,

first of all, the two parties must break the ties – a very hard task indeed. As the saying goes, ‘drastic times call for drastic measures’. Accordingly, the drummer and a single handgong player contribute to proceedings by executing several episodes of music that are entirely unbounded by rhythmic cycle, with both musicians frequently changing metre independently of one another. These frantically fast outpourings of musical patterns constitute the ritualists’ boldest representations of ‘breaking free’ and rare examples of traditional musical expression that is both heterometric and polymetric. According to the ritual musicians, at all times during Ogu Kut, the ideal way to play the ritual percussion instruments is “release hitting” (*p’urōsō ch’igi*). Featuring a verb form of the all-important ‘*p’uri*’ (Mills, 2010, p. 165), this often-used term – which is quite possibly peculiar to the East Coast ritual tradition – denotes a breaking free of constraints within the musician’s mind. Kim Junghee explained it to me as follows: limiting internal dialogue based on questions such as “Is this good? Is this bad?” must first be abandoned and only then can the music “all flow out from the bottom of one’s heart and soul”.<sup>17</sup> By clearly displaying this attitude, the musicians encourage the bereaved to similarly break free from their own personal confines of debilitating sorrow, obsessive thought patterns, and so on.

Between the episodes of lamentation and propitiatory ritual, the *mudang* include interludes for ‘letting off steam’. Here, rather than transform emotions through the ‘showing doing’ of performance (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998), the *mudang* encourage the bereaved to take active leading roles in proceedings. These interludes often involve exuberant singing and dancing, with the bereaved ‘breaking free’ of their sorrow (or at least attempting to do so), displaying their liberation for one another and for the spirits. The drummer provides backing beats known as ‘gogo’ rhythms while people take turns at the mic, where it remains set up before the altar. They generally



sing old favourites from the distinctive pop genre known as ‘trot’ (describing the typical rhythmic characteristics) and, sometimes, others get up to dance. In this way, the ritual space is temporarily transformed into a karaoke song room (*noraebang*) and crying temporarily gives way to laughter. As Daniel Kister describes it: “laughter transmutes woe into a surge of zestful triumph over life” (1997, p. x).

## **Actualisation**

There are many episodes in Ogu Kut that are less concerned with summoning deities, dispelling ghosts, and encouraging an unleashing of pent-up emotion. The dynamic is far more akin to that of a concert hall, with a pronounced performer/audience differentiation; the bereaved watch in silence as the *mudang* troupe put on a polished performance integrating song, dance, drama, and accompaniment.<sup>18</sup> But these episodes still perform important therapeutic functions. Featuring extensive use of symbolic props, they clarify details about what happens after death, performing a didactic role. At the same time, and more importantly, the dance-drama performance medium vividly actualises invisible metaphysical processes in a way that words alone cannot; the bereaved can see, hear, and experience the separation of their loved one as an objectified reality.

There is a greater concentration of such episodes in the second half of the ritual, following the resolution of the crisis in Chomangja Kut, beginning with a lengthy sung narrative myth telling the story of Princess Pari – a proto-*mudang* who journeys to the other world in search of an elixir to save her dying parents, facing and overcoming enormous obstacles on the way (see Lee Taedong, 1978, pp. 52–57). The story, which is sung by a single *mudang* to a solo drum accompaniment, helps the bereaved realise that

they too can overcome obstacles. Thereafter, the focus shifts to representing the deceased's own journey to paradise (which closely follows Buddhist conceptualisations), with themed dances and songs highlighting the successive stages: judgement by the Ten Kings of the underworld (see Mills, 2007, pp. 60–68); paying-off the Kings with flowers (represented with paper flowers from the altar); crossing the river that lies between the underworld and paradise (featuring focus upon a large paper boat); and journeying through the darkness (aided with highly colorful paper lanterns). At the most critical points, the bereaved are brought into the performance area to hold props and become willing and active agents in the process of separation.

The deceased's final entry into paradise and permanent separation from the world of the living is enacted through another deeply symbolic psychodrama: together, the bereaved hold a long white cloth and the officiating *mudang* walks from one end to the other, carrying various representations of the deceased and a piece of paper with the deceased's name written on it. Rather than walk alongside the cloth, she walks through the centre of it, tearing it in two as she goes.

## **Conclusions**

Over the course of Ogu Kut, the East Coast *mudang* troupe lead the bereaved through a remarkably varied programme of therapeutic episodes, giving them extensive opportunities to explore their feelings and thoughts about the deceased's passing, thoroughly and in many different ways; one minute, people are delving deeply into their loss and crying freely, the next minute they are dancing, singing and laughing, and the next they are watching and listening in meditative silence. This article has argued that,

throughout the various episodes, music is an indispensable tool for shaping the bereaved's experience (see also, for example, Wolf, 2001; McDaniel, 1978)<sup>19</sup>.

In many episodes, the ritualists employ music as an agent of attraction and convergence; through their musical mastery, they generate feelings of divine presence and social effervescence, bringing all the necessary parties together – dead, living, and gods. Conversely, in other episodes, the ritualists use music as an agent of repulsion; by beating their instruments, they 'beat the ghosts' and thereby ensure purification. Exploiting music's capacity to act as an emotive, the musicians also employ music to encourage emotions of intense sorrow and joy; the *mudang*'s 'weeping song' promotes cathartic weeping, the ritual musicians' 'release hitting' promotes release, and the 'gogo rhythms' get people up on their feet, dancing. On the other hand, there are plenty of occasions where music becomes more incidental (yet never unimportant) with more attentive focus placed on texts, dance, drama, or ritual action – for example during the final enactment of the deceased's journey.

The ritualists themselves tend to view their music's roles in such dualistic terms – attracting or repulsing, invoking sorrow or joy – with the overall objective being '*p'uri*': getting rid of negative forces. And, in contrast with certain other Korean ritual styles, the East Coast ritual style certainly *sounds* like a purgative; there is nothing at all soothing or gentle about the rhythms. Rather the extraordinarily loud music is akin to the heat of a sweat lodge: the bereaved cannot help but "share [their] somatic states" (Blacking, 1977, p. 10), the extreme heat/music merging with the inner pain to release tensions in the body (Hornborg, 2005, p. 386). So when the silence falls at the end of the ritual, everything is peaceful – both outside and inside.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian and Buddhist post-death procedures have built upon (and partially supplanted) earlier practices, which were more expressive of Confucian and Taoist philosophies.

<sup>2</sup> Some well-documented regional variants are: *Chinogwi Kut* and *Saenam Kut* (in Kyŏnggi Province), *Ssikkim Kut* (in the Chŏlla Provinces), and *Shiwangmaji* (in Cheju Island) (Kim Myŏngja, 1984, p. 42).

<sup>3</sup> This style of ritual is conducted along the whole stretch of the East Coast from the North Korean border down to Pusan. The data for this article was gathered from three Ogu Kut attended by the author: the first was for a middle-aged man who died in a car-crash (conducted on 12 March, 2000), the second was for a young unmarried sailor who drowned at sea (28–29 April, 2000), and the third was for a *mudang* (10 September, 2008). The procedure was much the same in all cases, also closely resembling that documented in Yi Du-hyun's excellent ethnographic account of a ritual conducted for a large group of drowned sailors (1988).

<sup>4</sup> For more information about the kinship practices and status of the East Coast hereditary ritualists see Mills 2007, pp. 6–16.

<sup>5</sup> There are other artistically accomplished styles of shaman ritual music that have been fostered by hereditary ritualists in different regions. The style from Chindo Island in the Southwest is particularly well-known (see, for example, Howard, 1989, pp. 159–215). It has been influential in the formation of many contemporary non-ritual genres such as *shinawi* and

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*sanjo*. Nowadays, however, the style is no longer performed for paying clients with a full ensemble of musicians; it has become a “quasi-folkloric show” (see Park, 2003, p. 362).

<sup>6</sup> The *mudang* troupe spends many hours manufacturing all of the decorations themselves before the ritual gets under way.

<sup>7</sup> Some *mudang* only require a small amount of preparatory trance-induction and there are even cases of people accepting spirits into themselves without any trance-promoting stimuli whatsoever – often with great dramatic effect (see Walraven, 2009, pp. 75–76). However, these are exceptional cases: charismatic *mudang* tend to acknowledge a need for prior trance-induction, with much of their rituals featuring vigorous pounding on metal instruments.

<sup>8</sup> On rare occasions, the spirit of the deceased may enter a family member during a specific episode in the ritual – but other spirits never do so.

<sup>9</sup> See Mills (2010) for a detailed musical analysis of the patterns played by hand gong players in ritual and non-ritual contexts.

<sup>10</sup> Music appears to serve similar roles in all forms of ritual wherein spirits are summoned – regardless of whether they are labelled “shamanic” or not by academics. In several crucial respects the *mudang* more closely resembles a medium than an archetypal shaman – for example, being unable to journey to other spirit worlds – and this facilitates comparison with non-shamanic spirit-summoning polytheistic ritual traditions such as those of the Yeye cult.

<sup>11</sup> Writing in respect to the ritual style of Korea’s Southwest, Lee Byong Won similarly identifies the musicians’ use of subtle tempo increase in conjunction with a movement towards “a momentum of tight coordination”, to induce “psychological tension” and “supernatural power” (1980, p. 138). See also Mills (2011) for further analysis of how musical performance is used to generate a shared emotion of ‘communal joy’ (*hŭng*), not only in Korean shaman ritual but also in other forms of Korean folk music.

<sup>12</sup> There is now quite extensive scholarship detailing the therapeutic strategies employed by *mudang*. Kim Kwangiel was perhaps the first to relate them to clinical strategies, namely:



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catharsis, abreaction, transference, persuasion, group therapy and autosuggestion (1988, pp. 142–157).

<sup>13</sup> During more emotionally-heated passages, the *mudang* may start the phrase on a higher pitch (ti), alternating between this and its neighbour (la), before continuing the downward contour.

<sup>14</sup> Some scholars have interpreted this as a rare example of ‘spirit incorporation’ in hereditary *mudang* ritual (for example, Walraven 1985, p. 6). However, the ritualists explained to me that the *mudang* is actually putting herself in the position of the subject “like an actor” (Mills 2007, pp. 31–32). Several also explained that is irrelevant whether or not people believe that the deceased is actually “speaking through her”; the important thing is for the expressed sentiments to be considered *true*.

<sup>15</sup> Kim Sökch’ul’s wife lost the use of her legs several decades ago and has remained in poor health.

<sup>16</sup> This translation is by the author and Sunghee Park. The extract is taken from the published transcript of the ritual (Kim Hōnsōn 2006, p. 185).

<sup>17</sup> As Kim himself acknowledges, this objective (which is by no means confined to the East Coast ritual tradition) obviously requires that one first become entirely fluent in the musical language, otherwise one’s playing will be disordered.

<sup>18</sup> Although some say that the entertainment is as much aimed to please the gods as it is the bereaved, I have heard several senior ritualists disagree, claiming that the needs of the bereaved remain paramount in their minds.

<sup>19</sup> Wolf has identified strikingly similar strategies in Kota post-death ritual – the use of varied therapeutic contexts to explore contrasting emotions (2001, p. 398).